Serbian Martyrology (June 15th)

COMMEMORATION OF THE NEW MARTYRS OF THE SERBIAN LAND

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August 28, 1999

This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. St. John 15:12-13

Troparion
Tone 8

Because of your faith in God and God's justice, ye have suffered earthly sorrow in the flesh; yet ye saved your souls, as heaven rejoices and your ancestors sin our in Heaven, greeting you at the gate of Paradise in son; Your names are in the book of eternity, enter into Paradise, ye children of immortality! Therefore, we on earth, your posterity, cry out in unison: Holy New Martyrs, pray for us.

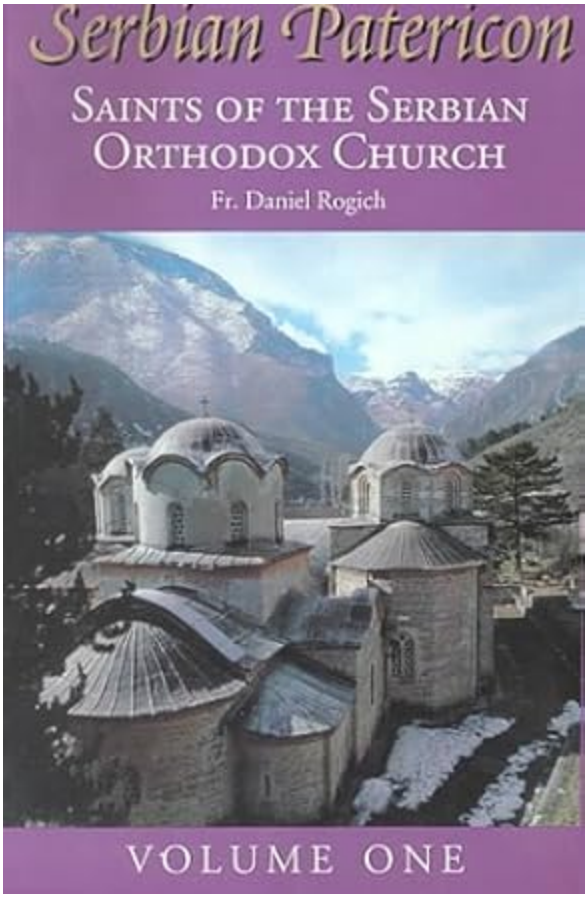
There is no greater witness to the total love of God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit than the pure and unconditional love a Christian has for his neighbour and all of God's creation. The love of God through one's neighbour is most fully expressed in humble and sincere service to others, and especially in the art of sacrificing for another. To lay down one's life for the promotion and aid of another is the pinnacle of what it means to follow Jesus Christ, to be a child of Light and a lover of mankind. The Christian witness of laying down one's own life--martyrdom, for the Greek word "martyria" literally means "witness"---is what our Savior accomplished *for the life of the world* (John 6:51), as Jesus Christ was no mere mortal, since His death on the Cross was greater than any other sacrificial death in the history of the world.

Jesus was the God-Man, truly God in human form, and thus His sacrifice on the Cross exhibited and demonstrated the superabundant love of God Himself for His entire creation: *For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (John 3:16). Accordingly, as every Orthodox Christian believes, it is the emulators of this sacrifice of Jesus---the glorious Martyrs---who have always been considered to be the Protectors of the Faith, as they have throughout the ages preserved our Faith whole and pure from all defilement of the devil. And every local Orthodox Church which has in her history the record of martyrdom can rightfully be considered blessed by God and even justified in His eyes.

Concerning this text and witness to the sacrificial Faith of Christ the Lord, the Serbian Orthodox Church remains, in the eyes of our Lord and the entire Christian world, most precious and beautiful! Ever since Christianity was established in the Balkans among the Serbs, persecution and resistance to the power of Christ have continuously reared their ugly heads. One need only read the Lives of the Serbian Saints to appreciate this fact. The enemies of pious Orthodox Serbs have relentlessly persecuted them throughout the century. They have attached their patriarchs, bishops, priests, monastics and pious faithful; slaughtering, hanging and impaling them, while at the same time plundering and burning down many Serbian Orthodox churches, schools and monasteries.

In the late 16th century, the Turks hanged the Serbian Patriarch John Kantul because he supported a national movement for liberation, and Bishop Theodore of Vrshac was skinned alive in 1595 for the same reason. During those dark days of Sinan Pasha, the Turks burned the holy relics of St. Sava I on Vracher Hill, a hideous religious and political crime committed against the entire Serbian Orthodox people. In the latter part of the 17th century, Patriarch Gabriel was strangled to death by the Turks for establishing ties with the Orthodox Church of Russia. At the beginning of the 18th century, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Dalmatia, which was under the domain of the Venetian Republic, endured bitter persecution due to their Orthodox beliefs, which fostered their desire for national rights. Two leaders---Abbot Isaiah of Dragovich Monastery and Fr. Peter Jagodich-Kuridza of the village of Biovice (Dalmatia)---were imprisoned and tortured for over forty years. Neither of the two, however, would recant their Orthodox faith nor their national allegiance to the Orthodox Kingdom of Serbia.

**** From the forthcoming second volume of Serbian Patericon, by Fr. Daniel Rogich***



Serbian Patericon: Saints of Serbian Orthodoxy

Similar tribulations took place during the heroic struggle of the Serbs for national liberation at the beginning of the 19th century. Hundreds of noble Serbian clergymen were impaled at the fields of Kalemegdan in Belgrade or were killed outright in prison camps. Throughout these ordeals, the constant cry which united and comforted the Serbs was the five-century-old rallying cry of Kosovo, “For the Honourable Cross and Golden Freedom,” a Christian plea based on the triumphant struggle of Jesus Christ on the Cross. For the Serbs at this time, to die for Christ and the Orthodox Faith was an honour, a holy privilege which they believed would be recompensed with eternal blessed life. For, as all pious Orthodox Christians believe, the Cross was the first step in the Lord's final victory over the devil and his power; and the Lord's Resurrection, the summit of this victory, granted true freedom to all those who endured. Hence, the Christian Serbs were happy to “lay down their lives” for Christ on behalf of their family, friends and nation.

During the first quarter of the 20th century, specifically during the years 1913, 1914 and 1915, the terrible assaults of the evil one rose up again against the Serbian Church. These years have been recorded as the first years of her martyrdom in modern times. Besieged by the Germans, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Albanians, the Serbian Church suffered bitterly during this time. For example, Metropolitan Vincent of Skoplje (Macedonia) was burned alive in the Gorge of Surdulica along with 157 Serbian priests. Later, during the 1930s, the Serbs suffered tremendously under the infamous Concordat, which sought to limit their religious and civil rights. *****

**** The Concordat was an attempt by the overly conciliatory government to sign an agreement with the Vatican that would have given the Roman Church a privileged position in Yugoslavia. It was finally defeated in 1937, thanks in large part to the heroic witness of Patriarch Varnava, who reposed during the heat of the controversy, and was thought by many to have been poisoned.***

But of all the persecutions in the history of the Serbian Orthodox nation, none was more excruciating and terrifying than those which began in 1941. The Serbs and the Serbian Church were forced to undergo some of the worst atrocities the world has ever known. It has been said that these Christians were tortured even more than the Hebrews were by the Egyptians as recorded in the Book of Exodus; worse than the barbarous annihilations in ancient Carthage and the exterminations of the Christians in Nubia, North Africa, and even worse than the Holocaust victims in Nazi Germany during World War II. In all, there were over 800,000 Serbs butchered and slain by the regime of Ante Pavelich in the "Free Croatian State" during World War II. In addition, many thousands of Serbs were forced to convert to Roman Catholicism under pain of death. (Many were simply asked to make the sign of the Cross, and if they did so in Orthodox fashion---from right to left---they were tortured on the spot.) Besides these, there were over 300,000 civilians killed by the Germans, Bulgarians, Hungarians and Albanians, many being sent to concentration camps to starve to death. In the end, the death toll of Serbian Martyrs amounted to over one-and-a-half million, or more than one-third of the entire Serbian people, over the span of thirty years (1914-1944, from World War I to World War II).

Must we provide the horrible details of these atrocities? Pregnant women's wombs were ripped open; men were roasted on rotisserie spits used to cook animals (there were cases in which people were forced to eat the roasted bodies of members of their own families). Malicious medical experiments were performed. People were impaled, had their eyes gouged out, or were sawn in two. Hearts were cut out of innocent victims and eaten by their adversaries. Slow, agonising deaths could last for weeks and weeks. Every manner of torture that the devil could instil in people to use on their fellow human beings was on full display during those years of tribulation.

During these persecutions, the leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church were the first to suffer and lay down their lives for their people. Bishop Platon of Banja Luka Z (Bosnia) was murdered in an incredibly bestial manner: he was taken by the Ustashas, ***** along with the previously arrested priest, Fr. Dusan Jovanovich, to the village of Vrbanja, where their beards were shaved with a blunt knife, their eyes were gouged out, their noses and ears were cut off, and a fire was lit on their chests. Their bodies, together with the bodies of several other martyred clergymen, were thrown into the Vrbanja River.

**** Croatian armed forces, formed by Hitler's Nazis to punish the Serbs for resisting him. Mostly Roman Catholic by faith, but including Moslems as well, they committed atrocities so horrible against the Orthodox Serbs that even the Nazi soldiers were appalled.--Ed.***

Archbishop Peter (Zimonich) of Sarajevo (Bosnia) was warned of the danger he was in from the Ustashas, but replied, I am the people's shepherd, and it is my duty to be with my people in good and in evil." He was arrested and imprisoned by the Ustaše on May 12, 1941, but was able beforehand to convey a message to his priests: "Stay in your parishes, and whatever happens to the people, let it be your destiny as well." He was tortured and humiliated in every way conceivable, and then thrown into a pit to die, together with 55 Orthodox priests.

Dositej Vasić, Metropolitan of Zagreb

Archbishop Dosithei of Zagreb (Croatia) was arrested on May 2, 1941, imprisoned, beaten and brutally tormented in a Ustaše police prison, with Roman Catholic monks taking part in this outrage. The result of his torture was seen by Arnold Robert, the Belgian consul, who said, “By God, what these people do is savagery!” Even the Ustaše police chief reported, “The Metropolitan was so atrociously tortured that it was hardly possible to put him on the train for Belgrade.” He died in Belgrade on January 14, 1945. Bishop Sava (Trlaich) of Plalski (Lika) was imprisoned on June 13, 1941 and tortured beyond endurance in a stable along with several priests. During their beatings, a phonograph recording of “As many as have been baptised into Christ, have put on Christ” was played. The bishop-confessor was permitted to say goodbye to his 83-year-old mother, albeit with his hands tied and his feet shackled. In mid-August of the same year, he was taken to the Velebit Mountain and thrown into a pit with numerous other Serbs. Bishop Irenei of Dalmatia was also imprisoned and later transferred to an Italian concentration camp near Florence. St. Nikolai (Velimirovich) * suffered in the worst Gestapo concentration camp, Dachau.

**** See his Life in The Orthodox Word, no. 171 (1993), pp. 160-183.***

The case of Patriarch Gabriel (1937-1950) must be mentioned. He was despised by the enemies of the Serbian Church not only for his leadership status, but also for his protest against this inhuman treatment of his people and flock. After Belgrade was occupied in April of 1941, Patriarch Gabriel fled to the Ostrog Monastery in Montenegro, where King Peter Karageorgevich of Yugoslavia joined him. When the Royal government decided to leave Yugoslavia with the King, Patriarch Gabriel was asked to follow, but he refused to leave, preferring to share in the sufferings of his spiritual flock. On May 9, 1941, the Nazis arrested Gabriel and the priests with him at Ostrog on the charge that the Patriarch was stealing newly claimed government property. (Being arrested was nothing new to the pious Gabriel, as he had been arrested in 1915 in Pech Monastery by the Austro-Hungarians.) From Ostrog, the 63-year-old Patriarch, by decree of the Nazis, was compelled to travel on foot to Belgrade, about a month's journey from Ostrog. To the horror of all, he was disrespectfully stripped of his monastic garb and forced to make the entire trip in his underwear. This humiliating plan of the Nazis failed, for along the way, wherever the Patriarch passed, the Serbian Christians wept and knelt in prayer to Almighty God for the alleviation of his sufferings. Patriarch Gabriel's witness to the Christian Faith was a tremendous source of strength and comfort to the pious Serbian Christians at this time. He was a meek lamb of God and emulated our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who was mocked and humiliated, using only godly courage, truth and meekness to endure and triumph in the end. Patriarch Gabriel was finally imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp in Germany (along with St. Nikolai), and later returned to the patriarchal throne after the war. He was one of the greatest Confessors of the Orthodox Faith that the Serbian people have ever known.

Many clergymen and monastics were executed right outside the walls of their churches and monasteries, in major cities such as Krushevac, Kragujevac, Mostar and Novi Sad.

Here are but a few of the well-known examples of the torments Serbia has been subjected to:

Glina---Over 120,000 were killed by the Ustashas, as many as six hundred per evening being bludgeoned to death assembly-line style in the local Orthodox churches. The few that survived fled to the area of Petrova Gora.

Vrgin Most---On August 3, 1941, 3,000 Serbs were massacred for refusing to convert to Roman Catholicism.

Vojnich---On July 29, 1941, the chief of the Ustaše police in Zagreb, Bozidar Gervoski, arrived with several Ustaše police units. They rounded up some 3,000 Serbian Christians from Krnjak, Krstinje, Siroka Reka, Slunj, Rakovica and other villages, and after mocking and torturing them, led them to the village mill in Pavkovich, where they were butchered like cattle.

Kordun, Slunj, Ogulin, Vrbovsko---The long list of bloody sacrifices began with the martyred priest Fr. Branko Dobrosavljevich from Veljun. Fr. Branko was ordered to read the canon for the departure of the soul from the body over his son, who was still alive. His son was then killed in his presence, and he was subsequently tortured and killed himself. There followed, for several weeks, mass executions of innocent Serbs, including women and children.

Churug, Novi Sad---On the Orthodox Feast of Christ's Nativity in 1942, about 1,200 Serbs, along with their parish priests, were cruelly murdered in Churug. At the end of the same month, 1,300 more Serbs, including clergy, met the same fate in Novi Sad.

Sadilovac---On July 31, 1942, the Church of the Nativity of the Theotokos was burned to the ground, along with 463 people, ranging in age from newborn babies to old men and women.

Zhitomislich Monastery---On June 26, 1941, Croatian Ustaše tortured and murdered the entire monastery brotherhood, then threw their bodies into a pit. A Roman Catholic friar removed all the church valuables by tractor; the monastery church was subsequently demolished, and then the rest of the buildings were burnt down.

Jasenovac---This was one of the most horrible sites of the persecutions against Orthodox Serbs. The Ustashas, including Croats and Muslims from Herzegovina, came with rifles, revolvers, axes and hammers, and brutally murdered the Serbs. To save ammunition, many Serbs were brought to the brick factory in Jasenovac and tossed into the fiery furnaces. As they were placed in a single file, the last person in line was shoved, creating enough force to thrust his fellow martyrs forward. Others were butchered along the Sava River and thrown into the water. The bloodthirsty Ustaše leader Ljubo Milosh boasted that he had killed over three thousand Serbs, each time jesting and crying out, "How sweet is Serbian blood!" One Orthodox Serb, Joca Divjak, was given to Milosh as a Christmas present. Martyr Joca's heart was torn out of his chest as other Serbs were forced to watch and laugh. Anyone who turned his head away from this abominable scene was killed on the spot. In all, over fifty thousand pious Serbian Orthodox Christians were martyred from August 1941 to February 1942---a period of seven months.

There are many other lists of savageries which could be recounted---the record is truly astounding! These facts reveal that the Serbian Orthodox Church is, in truth, a Martyred Church. Her recent history demonstrates a courage and commitment to the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, which grants the Serbian Church a rightful and honourable place in Christian history and, more importantly, in the eyes of God Almighty Himself. So many---literally a million and a half innocent victims---upheld the belief in "laying down their lives" for the cause of Christ and His Holy Church. Their sacrifice for one another is an eternal witness and memorial, which should and must inspire all Orthodox Christians until the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And truly, at the great Day of Judgment, they will all be crowned with an incorruptible crown of glory, received as a result of their love for truth and justice, and for carrying out the message of "the Honourable Cross and Golden Freedom."

**** In 1998, the Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church glorified several of the New Martyrs mentioned here.***

Holy New Martyrs of Serbia, you are now standing in glory before the Saviour's throne. Pray, therefore, O holy lambs of God, that we too, your wretched followers and posterity, may receive strength, courage and zeal for Christ our True God, that we might also be willing to witness to the Life-giving Cross and glorious Resurrection of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, to Whom belongs glory, honor and worship, together with His Unoriginate Father and Life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

KONTAKION
Tone 8 *

Let God be praised in the fields and meadows, * on the green mountain tops and in the valleys below, * on the rushing rivers and in dark caves, * since every place has been watered by the innocent and holy blood of many Serbian Martyrs: * worthy stewards, brave soldiers, young boys and children and chaste virgins; * let God be praised and let everyone keep silent, * for the Lord of all rules the world.

**** This Kontakion and the previous Troparion were composed by St. Nikolai (Velimirovich)***

Source: Orthodox Word, Vol. 35, No. 2 (205) March-April, 1999., St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, pp. 79-87.

Holy New Martyrs Of The Serbian Land,
Pray Unto God For Us!
Glory Be To God For All Things!